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The Road to Ruin(s): How to utilise historical and cultural resources for the benefit of the community, an essay.

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*“When I see some coloured stones on the floor I think how many people I can get to go past
and how much can I charge them; when I see some dabs of paint on a wall
I think will that look good on a T-shirt and how much can I sell it for;
when I see an old building I think can that be made into a boutique hotel
and how much can I charge per night.”*

One of fastest growing tourism sectors is visits to various communities’ cultural and historical resources (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). These visits if management effectively can be seen as a tool for the alleviation of poverty, the economic development of a community as well as preserving a community’s cultural and historical resources. However, there are a number of factors that critically impact on a community’s ability to utilise their cultural and historical resources. This essay takes a business development view on how a community might utilise the cultural and historical resources available for economic development. The essay will look at how to identify the business opportunity that exists and how to develop a proposal around the historical and cultural resources.

There seems to be a dilemma when looking at ways of retaining historical and cultural resources. On one hand you need to consider the value to the community of the resources and once that value is established what is the cost of keeping those resources. Making choices around these two factors is difficult and the choices become harder when the resources need to generate sufficient income to maintain them. No matter how important the resource, a commercial decision will need to be made that will almost certainly conflict with the ascetic value of the historical or cultural resource. In order to understand the difficulty there are two notions that need to be fully understood. The first is what does business do and the second is what culture is.

When asked what businesses do, most people respond by saying that they make money (profit) or provide goods and services. However, this is actually a consequence of the actions businesses undertake, rather than what they do. Of course they are expected to make money and in order to do so they need to provide goods and services, but what is the purpose of those goods and services? Fundamentally, businesses solve problems by exploiting resources. The problems exist because you can no longer look after yourself by exploiting those resources. Since the industrial revolution we have been unable to provide goods and services that we need to live. Before the industrial revolution, almost everyone would grow food and material for clothing, both basic survival needs, either individually or in small communities. Our excesses were traded for more sophisticated tools and equipment that not only made the growing of food and material that much easier, but also move us further away from the processes.

Since the industrial revolution we have developed a reliance on business to provide even the most basic necessities needed for a comfortable life. But, businesses do far more than that. Businesses have evolved an influence on you in a way that profoundly affects your life.

Fundamentally, you are who you are because of business. You dress the way you do because of business; you eat the food you eat because of business and your choices about the entertainment you enjoy is because of business. This influence even extends to who you are friends with. Social attraction is partially triggered by the clothes you wear and the places you visit. You are much more likely to be friends with someone who wears clothing you find attractive and visit a place you enjoy visiting. In fact businesses are aware of this and shamelessly exploit this in order to influence your buying decisions.

Understanding what businesses do makes it a lot easier to identify opportunities to commercialise historical and cultural resources. Understanding that you need to solve a problem for the customer enables you to begin to identify how that problem might be solved through engaging with your historical or cultural artefact or activity.

Yet what exactly is culture? It is often presented as historical buildings, food, clothing, music or dance. However, this is not really what culture is. Like making money or providing goods and services, historical buildings, food, clothing, music or dance are actually consequences of culture, they are not culture in themselves.

Primarily, culture is the expression of superiority of a set of principles through actions and or artefacts. These actions and artefacts are developed and retained over many years and become embedded within the social fabric of a community. Yet they are not static. They may change as other factors influence from outside the community and at times they may even lose value or be rejected completely.

The idea that culture is the expression of superiority of a set of principles through actions and or artefacts is certainly contentious, and is often met with resistance. Yet one might argue that if culture is not an expression of superiority why would anyone look to save the traditions of that culture. Furthermore, there would be little support to continue the traditions. Additionally, these artefacts and actions are embedded within the social structure of the community where the artefacts and actions reside. An example of this can be seen where a building of important historical significance is not valued by the local community, and consequently the building is demolished. You have your culture because you believe these are the best actions and artefacts that represent who you are and what your community represents, but maintaining these traditions comes at a cost. Many cultural artefacts and actions disappear because there is no money to retain them.

It is often only by taking a commercial approach to cultural heritage that you can preserve the tradition of that cultural heritage. The business opportunities for cultural heritage lie in solving the problems of the customers not by solving the problems of cultural or heritage site; and as a consequence of solving the customer problems the community benefits. In other words in developing a cultural or heritage artefact or activity commercially you need consider what problem does your cultural heritage solve not for the community but for the customer?

Bearing in mind that you are asking the customer to buy into your notion of superiority in order to solve a problem they have there are four critical factors that need to be considered as these four factors create the framework within which the customer's problem lies. These four factors form the basis of the problem you are trying to solve for the customer using your cultural heritage.

The four factors are not presented in any particular order. The first one to consider is the social and prestige value of your cultural heritage artefact or action has to the customer. Essentially, the customer is asking will engaging with this artefact or action enhance my social standing. What they want is to look or feel better as a result of participation. For example they may consider the value of being able to return home and boast about the engagement as a solution to their problem.

The second factor is economic. You are trying to get a customer to stick their hand in their pocket and give you money in return for the opportunity to experience the cultural heritage. So one of the things that cross their mind is whether the experience is going to be value for money. They need to know that it is financially viable to take part in the experience your cultural heritage offers.

The next two factors are quite closely linked. The first of these two is the acceptance of new ideas. The majority of people are reluctant to change and so many challenge the cultural heritage in terms of considering just how far they need to open their mind and have their own cultural values challenged. For example, they may ask to what extent would they be willing to look at an artefact that presents evidence that contradicts their own cultural values? Lastly the customer's vested interests come into play. The customer's own cultural identity may be challenged by your cultural heritage. As a result the customer would need to consider to what extent they need to move outside of their comfort zone in order to enjoy the exchange. Some cultural artefacts may be quite confronting to some people and this may need to be considered.

All 4 of these factors are interlinked and cannot be considered in isolation. If they cannot take away a solution to their problem when they go home at the end of their visit, you are still left with the activities and artefacts and no income. Clearly, understanding what business does, what culture is and how customers make decisions is critical to developing your cultural heritage commercially. If you fail to address any one of these points you will lose the customer and then you are on the road to ruin and not ruins.

References

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